

## **Lesson Four**

(15:1-8, 16:1-21)

### **THE LAMB AND THE SPIRITUAL CONFLICT**

In 14:1-5 the Lamb stands in Zion and receives the worship of the saints in heaven already "out" of the great tribulation, and the worship of the saints on earth "in" the great tribulation. Let a petty emperor of the earth in a little decade or even in a century or two assert his deity. He is nothing compared with the Christ of the ages! An emperor's enforced worship is a cheap sacrilege when viewed against the worship of God; his required formulas are nothing compared with the new song of the redeemed.

And in 14:6-20 the purpose of the eternal God is set over against that of an earthly pretender. An angel proclaims the purpose of God in an eternal gospel to every tribe under heaven. Men and nations are warned to worship not an impotent earthly creature but Him who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Those who do not will suffer judgment in torments forever in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. Many will not heed the warning. The Babylon (Rome) of John's day had caused the nations to follow after lies and to reject God. Babylon, the seat of Satan's rebellion, must therefore be judged by the gospel Babylon rejected. Jesus came with the eternal gospel to save. However, His coming became a judgment upon those who refused the truth because their deeds were evil (cf. Jn. 3:19-21; 9:39-41). All judgment has been given to the Lamb (cf. Jn. 5:22ff.).

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The judgment of the Lamb upon Babylon (Rome) has been building up to the crescendo of the seven *last* (Gr. *eschatas*, eschatological) plagues. This has been in process since the beginning of the seven seals (ch. 6) and the seven trumpets (ch. 8-9). Now the final judgment on Rome is about to break upon her. Chapter 15 pictures the temple in heaven (God's residence) opened and God's agents (angels) being sent to finish Rome's judgment. Chapter 15 is so directly and inseparably tied to chapter 16, we have chosen to make them into one lesson.

### **Pronouncement of Final Judgment: (15:1-8)**

**15** Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and wonderful, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its me, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. <sup>3</sup>And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and wonderful are thy deeds,

O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are thy ways,

O King of the ages!

<sup>4</sup>Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord?

For thou alone art holy.

All nations shall come and worship thee,

for thy judgments have been revealed.”

5 After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, <sup>6</sup>and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, and their breasts girded with golden girdles. <sup>7</sup>And one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives for ever and ever; <sup>8</sup>and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.

**v. 1 . . . seven angels with seven plagues . . .** — John saw these seven plagues in the form of a *portent* (Gr. *semeion*, sign) from heaven. The Greek word *plegas* (plague) literally means, “a stripe, or a wound” and is from the root word *plesso*, “to smite.” It is used metaphorically of any calamity. These “plagues” will be termed “bowls of the wrath of God” in chapter 16.

These seven plagues are called the *last* (Gr. *eschatas*, eschatological). The word *eschatos* does not necessarily have to mean the end of all time; it is used frequently in the New Testament to signify that God has reached some goal, in time, in his redemptive program (cf. I Cor. 15:45; Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; I Jn. 2:18; I Pet. 1:20; etc.). Last (*exchatas*) days in the New Testament often means the end of the Jewish dispensation and the beginning of the Christian dispensation. These *last* plagues signify God has reached the *goal* of judgment he put into operation with the seals and the trumpets upon the Roman empire. In these plagues the wrath of God was finished. The Greek word *etelesthe* is aorist tense and should be translated *was* finished—not shall be finished. The word is from *teleo* which means consummated, completed, reached the goal intended, or perfected.

**vv. 2-4 . . . those who had conquered the beast . . .** — John saw through the same crystal-clear sea, or sea of glass, he had seen earlier (4:6). This time the crystal-clearness surrounding the throne of God reveals the *fire* of God's judgment ready to fall in the form of the seven plagues upon Rome. John saw standing *beside* this fiery sea those conquering the beast and its image. The Greek participle *nikontas* (conquering) is in the present tense indicating John is being given a vision of the saints presently *in* the tribulation on earth as if they had already conquered the beast and were in heaven around the throne of God. This vision is a "sign" that those Christians who die during the pouring out of God's judgments upon Rome will go immediately to surround the throne of heaven with harps and songs of praise for the justness of God's judgments and the mercies of their redemption.

What are the harps? Are they literally instruments of music being used in the next life to praise God, or are they merely symbolical of praise being made with the voices of the saints in the next life? Harps are mentioned in 5:8 and 14:2. In 5:8 each of the twenty-four elders is said to be "holding a harp"; it would be difficult to be *holding* a symbol. In 14:2 a voice was heard *like* the *sound* of harpers—this does not necessarily specify an instrument. Here, in 15:2, the conquerors stand beside the sea *with harps of God in their hands*. Granted, this could be all a symbolic picture, symbolizing praise. But then the singing, the song and the voices of the saints should also be only symbolic and not real. We think it is not fair to the grammar, the context and the rest of the Bible to symbolize these harps in order to sustain an opinion that musical instruments are not to be used in the praise of God. A human voice is an instrument made of "clay"! The vocal chords of the human body will return to matter just as surely as the bronze of a trumpet or the steel of a harp-string. The archangel will signal the end of time with a blast from a trumpet (I Thess. 4:16)—perhaps this trumpet, too, is a symbol. Jesus worshiped in a Jewish temple where musical instruments were used; the apostles and early Christians worshiped God in the temple where musical instruments were played

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(Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:12, 20, 42; 21:26; etc.). If musical instruments are heaven's symbols, then the literal instruments should be acceptable for use in the early church. Nowhere in the New Testament is there a plain command that Christians should refrain from the use of musical instruments in praising God. If one should say the New Testament infers or implies non-use of instrumental music in worship, then one must also say the New Testament infers or implies non-construction of church buildings for God does not dwell in temples made with hands (cf. Acts 7:48; 17:24; Eph. 2:19-22).

The lyrics for the song of Moses are found in Exodus ch. 15. It is a psalm of praise for Israel's redemption from Egyptian bondage. This song was sung at every Sabbath evening service in the synagogue. At every Jewish service the recital of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9) is followed by two prayers, one of which refers to the song of Moses. The Christian saints have the song of Moses plus a new song—the song of the Lamb. The song of the Lamb, however, is a combination of praises compiled from the Psalms, the Prophets and the writings of Moses! You may find all the phrases in the following passages (Psa. 92:5; 111:2; 98:1; 139:14; 145:17; 86:9; I Sam. 2:2; Psa. 99:3; 111:9; 86:9; 98:2; Jer. 10:7). What better place to find words with which to praise God and the Lamb than in the scriptures!

Barclay makes a timely comment: "But there is another thing which must strike anyone about the song of the triumphant martyrs. There is not one single word in it about their own victory and their own achievement; there is not a single mention in it of their triumph; from beginning to end the whole song is a lyric outburst on the greatness of God." In light of so much modern "Christian" music making its focus on the personal victories and experiences of people, it is refreshing to read that in heaven hymns are total, complete, unadulterated praise of God and his deeds. In heaven, in the unobscured knowledge of God's nature and his redemptive grace, man forgets himself and all his achievements and even his trials. In heaven man will realize the greatness of God so fully and totally he will remember that nothing matters except God and the Lamb. "Heaven is heaven because in it at last all self, and self-importance, are lost in the presence of the greatness and the glory of God," (Barclay).

This paean of praise is interesting also from the fact that so much is said about God's judgments in it. First, the statement, "Just and true are thy ways. . . ." The judgments of God upon impenitent, rebellious, wicked and blasphemous sinners is just. God is not to be blamed, contradicted or disbelieved when he reveals his judgments about what is right and what is wrong (in his word). God is not to be declared unfair, unjust, or immoral when he executes his judgments in history through whatever secondary agents he may wish to serve him. It is only when the judgments of God are revealed that men of all nations come and worship Him. When God's

judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness (Isa. 26:9). If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness . . . for he does not see the majesty of the Lord (Isa. 26:10). How many Christians on earth praise God today for his judgments? Yet that is the song of heaven! More than half of modern Christendom believes that God's judgments (especially those revealed in the Bible) are mythological and allegorical—for if they were real they would consider them unfair, unjust and immoral.

**vv. 5-6 . . . the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened. . . .**— This phrase might well be translated, "the sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony was opened." The Greek word *naos* (temple) is used in Mt. 23:35 to designate the inner part of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Greek word *skenes* is often translated *tabernacle*; the Greek word *marturiou* is translated *testimony*. The "tent of testimony" is a common title for the Old Testament tabernacle (cf. Num. 9:15; 17:7; 18:2). John sees in a vision God's angelic servants coming out from the presence of God's written Law. The most important thing in the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant and the most significant thing in the ark was the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments). The tables of Stone symbolized the whole Law (or Will) of God. Rome, the beast, has defied the Law of God and blasphemed the Law-Giver. Rome has mocked and disobeyed every one of the Commandments. Now God must vindicate his law for his law is his character. He *must* be faithful to his word. The angels in procession, receiving the bowls of God's wrath to pour out, symbolize that God is about to uphold his word, verify his Law, and sustain his faithfulness. The whole Roman world is about to know that it cannot disobey the Law of God, remain impenitent, and escape the justice of God. These angels were dressed in priestly garments (pure white linen, and golden girdles). Priests of the Old Testament were charged with administering God's Law and executing punishments for disobedience to it.

**vv. 7-8 . . . seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God . . .**— One of the four living creatures gave the seven angels their bowls of wrath from God. That is appropriate imagery to symbolize that God will execute his wrath on Rome through secondary agencies of creation—through living nature and living people (see Rev. 4:6ff. for symbolism of four living creatures). The Greek word for *full* here is *gemousas* and is most often used to describe a ship *heavily* laden with cargo or passengers. These bowls are heavily laden with God's wrath.

The temple (or sanctuary) was seen to be filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter until the seven plagues were *finished* (Gr. *telesthosin*, reached their goal, perfected, completed). The smoke filling the sanctuary and making it inaccessible symbolizes God's refusal to hear any intercession for impenitent Rome. As others have pointed out, this imagery is from the Old Testament also. When the

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tabernacle was first erected, the glory of God filled it, and Moses was not able to enter it (Exodus 40:34ff.); when Solomon had completed the Temple the glory of God filled the house so that the priests could not minister (II Kings 8:10ff.). All this was to typify that man, the sinner and rebel, could not, on his own merit, come into the presence of God. Atonement had to be made and accepted in faith and obedience. Until that was done, no one could have intercession from God.

Here, the message is that Rome, sinful, rebellious and impenitent, has no intercession which God will accept. The sanctuary is closed. No approach of man to God on behalf of Rome will be heard because Rome has chosen to continue in rebellion against God. The righteousness of God must be upheld; his name must be avenged and vindicated; there is nothing that can be done to halt it or turn it back until it is done! The rebellious, impenitent and wicked Jews of Jeremiah's day were beyond intercession. God commanded Jeremiah that he must pray for them (cf. Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 15:1; 16:5; 17:1). Jesus sorrowfully had to pronounce upon the Jews of his day the inexorable judgment of God (Mt. 23:37-39). Not even Jesus could intercede for a people who rejected his intercession. When the Jews refused to know the "day of their visitation" (Lk. 19:41-44) there was nothing Jesus could do but weep.

### Plagues Poured Out (16:1-21)

**16** Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God."

**2** So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

**3** The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a dead man, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

**4** The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the fountains of water, and they became blood. **5** And I heard the angel of water say,

"Just art thou in these thy judgments,  
thou who art and wast, O Holy One.

**6** For men have shed the blood of saints and prophets,  
and thou hast given them blood to drink.

It is their due!"

**7** And I heard the altar cry,

"Yea, Lord God the Almighty,  
true and just are thy judgments!"

**8** The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch men with fire; **9** men were scorched by the fierce heat, and they

cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.

10 The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was in darkness; men gnawed their tongues in anguish<sup>11</sup> and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

12 The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.<sup>13</sup> And I saw, issuing from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, three foul spirits like frogs;<sup>14</sup> for they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.<sup>15</sup> ("Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!")<sup>16</sup> And they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon.

17 The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!"<sup>18</sup> And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake.<sup>19</sup> The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath.<sup>20</sup> And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found;<sup>21</sup> and great hailstones, heavy as a hundredweight, dropped on men from heaven, till men cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

**vv. 1-2 . . . foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast. . . .** — Lenski summarizes succinctly that the seven *seals* reveal, the seven *trumpets* announce and warn, and the seven *bowls* execute. The bowls are the final series of judgments; they complete God's conflict with Rome. They are the final judgments and are presented as in process and as God's direct action in defense of his saints, and the vindication of his honor and faithfulness. The loud voice from the sanctuary commanding the angels to pour out the bowls is God's voice. Orders come for Rome's destruction from none less than the Omnipotent Creator and Judge of all that is. The Greek word *phialas* is sometimes translated *vial* and is the word from which the English word *phial* comes; however, the Greek word really means a broad, shallow vessel or large, deep saucer; the word is suggestive of rapidity in the emptying of the contents. The number seven, as we have seen, represents completeness or perfection. When God's wrath is poured out on Rome, it will not need to be poured out on her again—she will have come to an end.

The *destruction* of Rome has God's approval. We know this is referring to Rome because people are left alive, refusing to repent, *after* the bowls are poured out which would be the case at the end of time (cf. 16:6, 9, 10,

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11, 12, 19). We also know this is Rome from chapters 17-19. The bowls (plagues) signify that Rome will go through a process of pestilence, mourning, famine, and violence (18:8, 20, 21). The violence will include internal revolution (the people who had listened to Rome and followed her policies will hate her and revolt against her, 17:15, 16); this is the disaster that befalls Rome for opposing the sovereignty of God and the Lamb and for refusing to repent.

These plagues are the natural consequences of sin (cf. Rom. 1:18-32). They represent the wrath of God inherent in sin. Sin has these plagues inherent within it. They are the result of defying God's moral Laws. God uses nature and uses history to destroy that which opposes his redemptive kingdom in the world.

The bowls (plagues) are to be understood as hyperbolic; apocalyptic and symbolic. They do not need to be interpreted as supernatural events. The prediction in 17:16-17 indicates that the "city" will be laid low by traitorous friends, by the beast itself turning on itself, and by the puppet allies (the 10 horns) of the beast. John clearly represents Christians as being present on earth, within the Roman empire, as the plagues (bowls) are descending upon the "harlot," (18:4). Just as in the case of the impenitent Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the bowls fail to work repentance in the hearts of the enemies of God in Rome. Since Rome was at the peak of her power in John's day, and evidently in no danger of falling, the bowls *predict* the yet undiscovered future destruction of Rome.

If we seek for some illustration in our time of the certain and continuous operation of the wrath of God in history against a people who turned from God to deify its own rulers, we may find that illustration in the case of Germany. If there be any doubt that the wrath of God as illustrated in the pouring out of the bowls could be expressed in history by natural means, let the terrible destruction and carnage visited upon Nazi Germany and the downfall of this once proud state serve as the answer to the doubt. Nazi Germany deified Hitler and made Nazism a religion, paralleling rather closely the action of the ancient Roman Empire in deifying the emperor and making a religion out of emperor worship. This is not to place upon Germany all the blame for World War II, nor is it to solve all the mysteries connected with the suffering of the innocent as a result of that conflict. It seems significant, however, that no nations in that conflict, Germany and Japan, which deified their rulers lost their sovereignty as nations. It might be pointed out here that there has been no sovereignty in history which has successfully challenged the sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ. Might this not be considered a token of the fact that there never will be in history a nation which will successfully challenge that sovereignty?

—E.A. McDowell, *The Meaning and Message of the Book of Revelation*, pp. 164-165



The first bowl was poured out upon the earth and foul and evil sores came upon those who bore the mark (character, identity) of the beast and who worshipped the beast's image. *Foul* (Gr. *kakos*, noisome) may be defined as troublesome, injurious, woeful, distressing, whether physically or mentally. *Evil* (Gr. *poneron*, abominable, wicked) may be defined as painful, virulent, serious, or grievous. *Sore* (Gr. *helkos*, abscess) may also be translated, ulcerous or angry. Some understand this bowl of wrath to be predicting literal diseases which came upon the Roman empire as a consequence of its insatiable lust to conquer other nations (contagious diseases) and its decadent sexual immoralities. Others interpret this symbolically to represent the breaking out of corruption in the whole diseased social, economic, educational and political world of Rome where ungodliness and unbelief has been willingly exchanged for the truth of God (cf. Rom. 1:18ff.). It may predict both! Both were certainly used as instruments of God to bring about Rome's fall.

**vv. 3-4 . . . the sea . . . became like the blood of a dead man . . . the rivers and fountains of water . . . became blood.** — "Sea" is often used to symbolize the whole mass of humanity (Isa. 8:7ff.; Jer. 46:7-9; 47:2; Isa. 17:2ff.; 57:20-21; Rev. 17:1, 15; see comments Rev. 13:1). The second and third bowls are definitely connected to the parenthetical statement in 16:5-7. It is apparent that John is predicting judgment upon the Roman empire in such a blood-bath as to permeate the whole mass of humankind as to be symbolized by all the "waters" on the face of the earth becoming blood. The "blood of a dead man" is life poured out. It signifies death! The life of the flesh is in the blood (Lev. 17:11) and when it is the blood of a dead man it has been poured out of the man. Rome shed the blood of the saints and prophets in terrible persecutions, and soon God would pour out her blood all over the empire in retribution. The assassinations by paranoid emperors and subordinate rulers (like Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Domitian, the Herods, and others) contributed to the blood-bath of the empire; the wars of aggression, the invasions of barbarian hordes, crime, disease, famine, natural disasters and the like also poured the blood of mankind out until the "sea" of humanity became blood!

These two bowls might also signify God's use of the sea and rivers as destructive forces of nature to pour out the life-blood of Rome until she was dead. That would parallel second and third trumpets.

**vv. 5-7 Just art thou in these thy judgments . . .** — God is just and righteous in all his judgments (Psa. 119:137; 145:17; Deut. 32:4; Dan. 9:14; Hosea 14:11; etc.). See comments on Rev. 15:3. When man disobeys the laws or commandments of God it is just and fair and right that he receive a commensurate punishment or reward for such violation. God is Creator and Sustainer—he is Absolute. He cannot be blamed. The creature who willfully rebels is to blame. God offers a merciful way, through belief of his Son, for man to repent. If man deliberately and knowingly refuses

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God's mercy, he must suffer the penalty. God, by his very nature, must execute the penalty of his law or he cannot be trusted to be Absolute. Rome was warned (Rom. 1:18ff.) by nature and by the revealed Word of God, but she refused the offer of mercy and would not change her mind (repent). God must execute his promised penalty or his sovereignty is invalid.

Verse 6 indicates that the "sea" or "waters" symbolizes pagan humanity of the Roman empire—those who worshiped the beast—because they are the "men" who shed the blood of saints and prophets. The harlot (Rome) is the one seated on many waters (17:1ff.) and she is the one whose judgment the saints and apostles and prophets were to rejoice (18:20). Rome shall be paid back with blood to such an extent that she will have nothing to drink but blood! Rome must reap what she has sown. God is not mocked—God is just (Gal. 6:7-8). The word *due* is the Greek word *axioi* from which we get the English word, *axiomatic*, *axiology*, and means "due, lawful, equal, value-received." It is axiomatic (moral, fundamental, truism) that rebellion against the Absolute God will be judged and punished. There is no escaping this principle—it is a law of the Creator. The Creator has written it in nature, on human conscience, and in his propositional revelation, the Bible. It is impossible for man to gainsay it. Man may attempt to refuse to acknowledge it, but he cannot.

The angel of water (each instrument of judgment in the bowls has its "angel") cried out that God was just in these judgments. The "altar" (the souls under the altar of the martyred saints, 6:9-11) gave the antiphonal reply, "Yea, Lord God Almighty, true and just are thy judgments!" These persecuted saints had prayed for vindication of their faith and suffering (6:9-11; 8:1-5) and now it is about to be answered. The student should turn to Isaiah ch. 13 & 14, to Jeremaih ch. 50 & 51 and read again God's statements about his vengeance upon ancient Babylon.

**vv. 8-9 . . . the sun, and it was allowed to scorch men with fire . . .**—The pouring out of the fourth bowl produced a "fierce heat" which "scorched" men. The Greek words used are *kaumatisai* (from *kausis*, English *caustic*) and *puri* (from *purros*, English *pyre*); men were burned acutely, crisply, severely on a pyre. The picture is one of immolation, self-destruction in a consuming fire. This "sun" was *allowed* (not forced) to scorch men with fire; they brought it on themselves. Those who play with fire will be burned (cf. Ps. 97:3, 7; Isa. 47:13ff.; Isa. 50:11). These deceiving pagans had tried to imitate "fire from heaven" (Rev. 13:13), now they will have the real thing.

This great "fire" could be God's use of the natural elements (as in the darkening of the celestial lights in the fourth trumpet (8:12). In the case of the fourth bowl God may have used the sun to produce droughts and radiation to destroy life, just as he does today. This fourth bowl could also refer to some sort of psychological torment symbolized by fire (cf. Lk.

16:24-31) such as guilt, conscience and anticipation of judgment (cf. Heb. 10:26-31; 12:25-29). Conscience is certainly a tormenting "fire" for the sinner (cf. Psa. 38:1-10; Dan. 6:16-18; etc.). It is possible that the fourth and fifth bowl are both symbolizing spiritual suffering and mental anguish of Rome's heathenism. The pathos of it all is that rather than being moved to repent through this fiery judgment (whether physical or spiritual) those who worshiped the beast blasphemed (cursed) the name of the God who had authority (power) over this destruction. Pharaoh would not allow the plagues of Egypt to soften his heart—but he hardened his heart against all efforts to get him to change his mind. That is the very nature of ultimate truth—it is never forced upon anyone. It may be accepted and trusted, or distrusted and disobeyed, but it will stand inflexibly, relentlessly and uncompromisingly. All truth is moral for all truth is from God and is designed to stamp the image of God's nature upon his creatures. But his image (seal) can be rejected in favor of the image of the beast if man chooses. Actually, God is going to give every man what that man chooses.

**vv. 10-11 . . . the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was in darkness . . .** — The fifth bowl parallels the fifth trumpet. In the fifth trumpet the bottomless pit was opened (9:1-11) and a cloud of stinging locusts belched forth like a cloud of black smoke; men with the mark of the beast were tortured until they sought death (which they were unable to find). In the fifth bowl the throne of the beast (Rome's imperial leadership) was in darkness. This symbolizes the fact that Rome, although "claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22) and they "became futile in their thinking and the senseless minds were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). They exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25) and were without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 1:12). The wisdom that comes from God, the only wisdom there is, they did not have because they did not *want* to have it. All that is left for them is the darkness of wickedness, superstition, falsehood, rebellion and sin. Rome's imperial leadership could not lead the empire out of darkness and chaos because they were blinded by their own deceitfulness—can the blind lead the blind? They would not acknowledge and follow the truth of God and the Lamb because they arrogantly enthroned themselves as gods, (Rom. 1:18-22). They said, "We see!" therefore, they could not see (cf. Jn. 9:39-41).

When this black cloud of smoke (9:1ff.) darkened the throne and kingdom of the beast now with the fifth bowl in judgment, men *gnawed* (Gr. *emassonto*, from *massaomai* meaning to chew, eat, consume, used only here in the New Testament) their tongues from the torment or anguish. This picture is just like that of the fifth trumpet but with great intensification. In the fifth trumpet they were tormented only five months and not killed. Here they *consume* (meaning of the Greek word *massaomai*) themselves from the anguish.

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Once again men blaspheme God and blame Him for their judgment and refuse to repent. Men who refuse to acknowledge their own moral turpitude will inevitably blame God or someone else for their sufferings.

The failure of men to repent when these bowls are poured out shows that these plagues are not the final judgment. At the *final* judgment there is no opportunity even presented for repentance. The *final* judgment is not intended to bring men to repentance but to everlasting punishment. These bowls were intended to bring men to repentance but did not.

**vv. 12-16 . . . the great river Euphrates . . . was dried up . . . they assembled . . . at . . . Armageddon** — The sixth bowl parallels the sixth trumpet (9:13ff.). Both symbolize invasion of the Roman empire by the barbarian Partians, Goths, Ostrogoths, Visigoths and Huns (see comments Rev. 9:13-19). In the sixth trumpet only a third of mankind was hurt, but in the sixth bowl the whole world is assembled to do battle with the kings from the *east* (Gr. *anatolon heliou*, where the sun rises). These barbarian invasions eventually brought Rome's complete destruction.

Out of the mouth of the dragon (Satan), the beast (emperor), and the false prophet (second beast, pagan religion), John saw three *unclean* (Gr. *akatharta*) spirits (Gr. *pneumata*). These had the symbolic appearance of frogs, but they were demonical. A frog is, of course, "unclean" or illegal (Lev. 11:9ff.) to a Jew. That has some significance. In Egyptian mythology the frog represented supernatural life-giving power. The frog was the symbol of the goddess Hekt, who was believed to blow the breath of life into the nostrils of the bodies of men that Hekt's husband (Khnnum) had fashioned on the potter's wheel from the dust of the death. Hekt supposedly assisted women in childbirth, and was a symbol of the resurrection and fertility. Each September after the summer overflowing of the Nile had gone down, frogs would become numerous in ponds of water all over Egypt. Their croaking was a reminder that the gods had done their duty again and another fruitful year lay before them.

The "frogs" John sees perform lying signs and wonders throughout the Roman world to assemble all the kings of that world for battle with God on His great day of judgment on Rome. We believe the unclean, demonic breathings (spirits) represent the "river" of lies issuing from the dragon, the first beast, and the second beast (false prophet) designed to deceive all those who dwell on earth (see comments Rev. 13:13-15). Rome assimilated false religions from all over the world, including Egypt. Men supposedly made reptiles speak oracles of truth and prophecy for guidance. False prophets of heathen religions kept predicting another fruitful year for Rome or that Rome would never die. False prophets are characterized by Peter as irrational animals (II Pet. 2:10ff.). The false prophets of Rome kept deceiving the whole Roman world with their "signs" of Rome's invincibility and eternity so that all the subordinate "kings" of Rome

aligned themselves or assembled themselves with Rome. Then God judged them *with* Rome.

To say that frogs came out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet is to say, symbolically, their words were like plagues, that they were unclean, that they were empty "croaking" and meaningless. False, ungodly, immoral emperor-worship and pagan cultism brought a plague of heartlessness and ruthlessness upon the Roman world (cf. Rom. 1:18-32).

The "battle" on the great day of God the Almighty is the battle the Lamb is to have with the Roman empire for sovereignty. It is the same battle described in Daniel 2:44-45 and 7:7-27 between the saints of the Most High and the fourth beast (Rome). It is not specifically predicting or referring to the end of time (certainly not to some alleged "seven years of tribulation" either preceding an alleged literal earthly reign of Christ or following one). This victory of the Lamb and the saints over the Roman empire may symbolize the end of time and the consummation of everything (just as Old Testament victories symbolized the messianic conquest—the church), but is not predicting any battle between Russia and the present nation of Israel. If ancient Rome's conquest by Christ and the church symbolizes anything, it prefigures the complete and final destruction of *all* human, earthly governments—American, Israeli, Russian and Chinese, and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth (II Pet. 3:10; I Cor. 15:24ff.).

The Revelation is here using the same terminology and symbolism used by the Old Testament prophets on so many occasions. It is the seminal idea that is important. That idea is the faithfulness of God to keep his promises of deliverance and eternal perpetuation of his church (the kingdom of God). What God accomplished for Old Testament Israel by bringing "great days" of judgment upon Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Edom, et al., he accomplished for new Israel (the church) by bringing down "great days" of judgment upon Rome. The Bible is not as concerned to give man chronological timetables when it speaks of God's faithfulness in history, as it is to emphasize the *fact* of God's faithfulness and absolute sovereignty. Two clear examples of God's apocalyptic judgments on the enemies of God's covenant people are in the Old Testament—Ezekiel chs. 38-39, Gog and Magog, and Joel chs. 2-3, the Valley of Jehoshaphat. It will be apparent to the reader of those passages that a literal fulfillment is impossible: *all* nations could not be gathered in the Valley of Jehoshaphat; the number of enemies necessary to leave behind weapons for seven years of fires and dead corpses for more than seven months of solid burying (approximately 360,000,000) could not possibly fit into and subsist in the land of Palestine, literally. These Old Testament "Armageddons" are probably referring to the *complete defeat* of the ultimate attack on God's redemptive program—the devil's attempt to devour the "male-child" (see Rev. 12:1ff.)—when Christ

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arose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and established his church on Pentecost. The Old Testament "Armageddons" may, in fact, be predicting not only the *establishment* of the church of Christ but its victory over the last (fourth) beast of Daniel (Rome).

The word *Armageddon* in Greek is *Harmageddon* and is a combination of two words, *har* (meaning, mountain) and *megiddo* (a city overlooking the plain of Esdraelon). It was a famous battlefield in Hebrew history. Gideon and his 300 defeated the Midianites here; Saul was defeated by the Philistines here; Barak and Deborah overthrew the hosts of the Canaanite king, Jabin, here; Ahaziah died of Jehu's arrows here; Pharaoh-Neco overthrew Josiah here. Armageddon, the mountains and valleys of Meggido, aptly symbolizes the forces of righteousness and evil engaged in deadly struggle. In the days of Deborah Sisera had 900 chariots of iron (Judges 4:13), but in Israel there was scarce a shield or spear among 40,000 (Judges 5:8). Israel's situation seemed completely hopeless, but God delivered!

Armageddon represents the decisive conflict between the worship of Caesar and the worship of the Lamb. Contrary to every theory involving a literal interpretation of Revelation, it should be clear that the book involves in its whole context a battle of opposing cultures (pagan and Christian) waged by opposing ideologies: Human language could not give a clearer picture of humanism (Caesar-worship) than the Apocalypse does. Humanism is the deceptive propaganda which gathers all who bear the character of the beast for the ideological and moral battle against God's forces of righteousness. The Roman empire was the apex of humanism. If humanism was ever to control all of mankind that was when it would have been done. But, just as Daniel predicted, and as John predicts in Revelation, humanism came to its Armageddon.

Armageddon as John sees it has no location on the maps of the world; it is spiritual, not spatial. The battle is not one in which material, physical armaments will decide the issue; the battle was really decided at the cross of Christ, at the empty tomb, and at the fall of the last world-dominating empire of humanism (Rome). Rome's Armageddon came when Diocletian lost his battle to eradicate Christians and their Bibles. It came when Constantine declared Christianity no longer an illegal religion and the gospel began to be carried to the far reaches of mankind (see comments Rev. 11:11-13).

Christ's defeat of the threat of universal humanism by the fall of Rome took the world unawares—just as a thief slips up on his victim. The world was "holding a party" (Rev. 11:7-10) celebrating its victory over Christianity and suddenly, with simply the change from one emperor to another, the beast was slain. Christ encouraged Christians who read in Asia Minor to guard against being caught without their robes or righteousness in Him when He judges the beast.

vv. 17-21 . . . a great voice . . . from the throne, saying, "It is done!" — This is the seventh bowl of wrath. It is poured into the air to symbolize its permeation of the realm of the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:22). It also symbolizes that it comes from the throne of heaven. The fact that there was a *great* voice, from the *temple*, from the *throne*, emphasizes the finality and absoluteness of this seventh bowl. The Greek verb, *gegone*, is perfect tense, translated, "It is done," and means literally, "it has been done and will continue with its results." That is, when the seventh bowl was poured out, Rome fell and the results continued. It was done, just as the predictions of Daniel and John foretold, and the "kingdom and dominion . . . were given to the people of the saints of the Most High." And there will never be another kingdom of universal humanism posing such a threat to the church's existence. When the seventh bowl was poured out into the devil's sphere, the devil was bound (cf. comments on Rev. 20:1-6).

The visions of the Throne (4:5), the Seven Seals (8:5) and the Seven Trumpets (11:19) were attended by visions of cosmic phenomena (lightning, thunder, hail and earthquakes). Now, at the conclusion of the Seven Bowls, the cosmic phenomena are *great*. This passage is symbolic in nature. It does not mean there had to be a literal earthquake which measured on the seismograph the highest ever. It symbolizes the fall of Rome and the spiritual forces behind her (the devil) in such a devastating degree that there had never been such a fall before. There had never been a greater force displayed against God's kingdom before Rome ("the great city") (see Daniel chs. 2 and 7). The "great city" was earlier introduced by John (11:8; 14:8). Now, with the final bowl of wrath, the great city is split into three parts—divided for destruction (cf. Ezek. 5:2ff.; Rev. 18:8).

The great city (Rome) does not go down alone. All the cities of the nations fall with her. All the people of the Roman world seduced into drinking the "wine of the wrath of her fornication" (see comments 14:8), those who have the mark of the beast, are doomed with her. With the pouring out of the seventh bowl Rome is made to drain the cup of the fury of God's wrath. "Islands and mountains" (their inhabitants) which have joined in the "fornication" of the great city also attempt to flee from the wrath of God but to no avail. They, too, fall and there is no vestige of the beast's dominion left. This is normal apocalyptic, symbolic language (see Ezek. 26:18). Hail (approximately 100 lbs. in weight) is also symbolizing divine judgment (cf. Ex. 9:18-26; Psa. 78:47; 105:32; Josh. 10:11; Isa. 28:15-18; Ezek. 38:22).

Although these seven bowls represent the final and complete judgment of the Roman empire, we see again that they do not predict the end of time and the judgment at the Second Coming of Christ. After the huge "hailstones" did their work there were still men cursing God for the "plagues" sent upon that world, and not repenting.

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON REVELATION

The seven bowls of God's wrath symbolize the final judgment of God upon the Roman empire. They represent natural and historical forces used by the Sovereign God to execute His wrath. That is not at all unusual. It is a principle revealed repeatedly in the Bible from the flood of Noah through the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and substantiated in Acts and the Epistles. Any challenge to God's sovereignty as wicked and pervasive as that of the Roman empire's cannot go unanswered. God must vindicate his holiness and absoluteness (see Ezek. chs. 20, 33, 34, 35, etc.). The demonstration of God's sovereignty cannot await the final judgment if man is to be given a visible warning to repent. So God executes his judgments continuously upon a world doomed to destruction through natural and historical and psychological tribulations. If God has dealings at all with man—if there is action and reaction in history in which God is involved—the relationship between God and man and history must exhibit God as he is. God is absolutely sovereign and absolutely just. God must, therefore, exhibit Himself in history as sovereignty knowing and directing history; He must exhibit Himself in time and space, while history proceeds, as just, punishing rebellion and sin by His wrath. The necessity for God to thus exhibit Himself is fulfilled in His moral governing of history. God's moral government continually expresses itself in "the things that are made" (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; 2:4; Acts 14:15-18; Gal. 6:7-8; Lk. 13:1-9; etc.). God's will that those who rebel against Him shall reap what they have sown is not reserved in its entirety until the final judgment.

A contextual and Biblical interpretation of the seven bowls is that they symbolize the effects of the wrath of God executed through historical and natural conditions and human events to bring about the disintegration and downfall of the heathen world power which challenged the sovereignty of the Lamb through imperial Rome. Such an interpretation does not exclude the truth that the historical manifestation of the truth of God upon Rome *prefigures* the consummation of his wrath in the final end of the world. The wrath of God displayed continually in history (from the Flood to today) is to be accepted by Bible believers as *prefiguring* the final judgment (cf. II Pet. 3:1-18). Every exhibition of God's wrath in history is a foretaste of the wrath to come at the end of time (cf. Mt. 24:36-44).

Executions of God's wrath continually in history are also a vindication of the faithful endurance of God's suffering saints. In breaking of the fifth seal there was a cry from underneath the altar, "How long . . ." When the third bowl is poured out we have the dramatic sequel to this cry, "And I heard the altar saying, Yea, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments." The sacrifices of God's people *are* vindicated. Their vindication does not have to await the final judgment. Those who have eyes of faith will see such vindications continually in history!



## APPREHENSION AND APPLICATION:

1. Does the word *last* (Gr. *eschatos*) always have to mean the absolute, final, end of all things in the Bible? What else can it mean? If these seven plagues do not mean the end of the world, what do they mean?
2. What do you think about musical instruments being played in worship of God? in heaven? on earth? Can you worship God without them? with them?
3. What is the song of Moses? What is it all about? Why is it sung by Christians? What is the song of the Lamb? How is it different from that of Moses? How are they both different from much of modern "Christian" music? Do you give most attention to lyrics or beat or melody?
4. Do you praise God for His judgments? Do you question God's fairness, ever, in any of his judgments? What about his ordering the Jews to kill *all* the Amalekites (I Sam. ch. 14 & 15)? What about judgment on Rome?
5. What was the point in giving John a vision of the "sanctuary of the tabernacle of testimony"? You have often thanked God that He keeps His word to redeem, deliver and bless—have you thanked Him that He keeps His promise to judge and destroy the wicked?
6. What do the bowls represent? Is it necessary to think of them as supernatural judgments at the end of time? Do these bowls parallel the seals and trumpets in any fashion? Are there any parallels to bowls of wrath in modern history?
7. What are the possibilities for interpreting the meaning of the "foul and evil sores" of the first bowl? What about the second bowl? The third, and the fourth? Do you see any pattern on the *agency* used by God in the first four bowls? Does this pattern follow, generally, the first four seals and first four trumpets?
8. Why do you think so much emphasis is placed in these later chapters (15, 16, 18, 19) on the *justice* of God's judgments on Rome? Did you realize it was that emphatic in the New Testament?
9. How does the fifth bowl parallel that of the fifth trumpet? How is it different?
10. How does the sixth bowl parallel the sixth trumpet? What are the three frogs? How do they gather the kings of the whole world for battle? What is the battle of Armageddon? What do you think of much modern eschatology today which makes Armageddon a literal war in the 20th or 21st century between Russia and Israel with nuclear weapons?
11. Why is the seventh bowl poured "into the air"? Why does the great voice say, "It is finished"? What Old Testament imagery divides into three parts for destruction? Who goes down to destruction with the great city?
12. How are the bowls the answer to the cry of the martyred saints under the altar "How long, O lord. . . .?"

# THE SEVEN BOWLS OF THE WRATH OF GOD

## Revelation 16



**Bowl 1:** Foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. Contagious disease in plague proportions; a "natural" result of wicked lust to conquer and social immoralities.



**Bowl 2:** A "blood-bath" falls upon the masses of heathen humanity ("the sea") in the Roman empire until there is wide-spread death. This "blood-bath" is due to natural disasters, pestilence, famines, war.



**Bowl 3:** The same "blood-bath" as the second bowl. Both these bowls are judgments which are "due" the Roman empire for its vicious blood-letting upon God's saints and prophets.



**Bowl 4:** An acute fire is allowed to "burn" Rome to a crisp. They "played with fire" and now they must be burned. It could be natural "fires" in drought, radiation, or forest fires. It could be psychological "fires" in the conscience in anticipation of judgment.



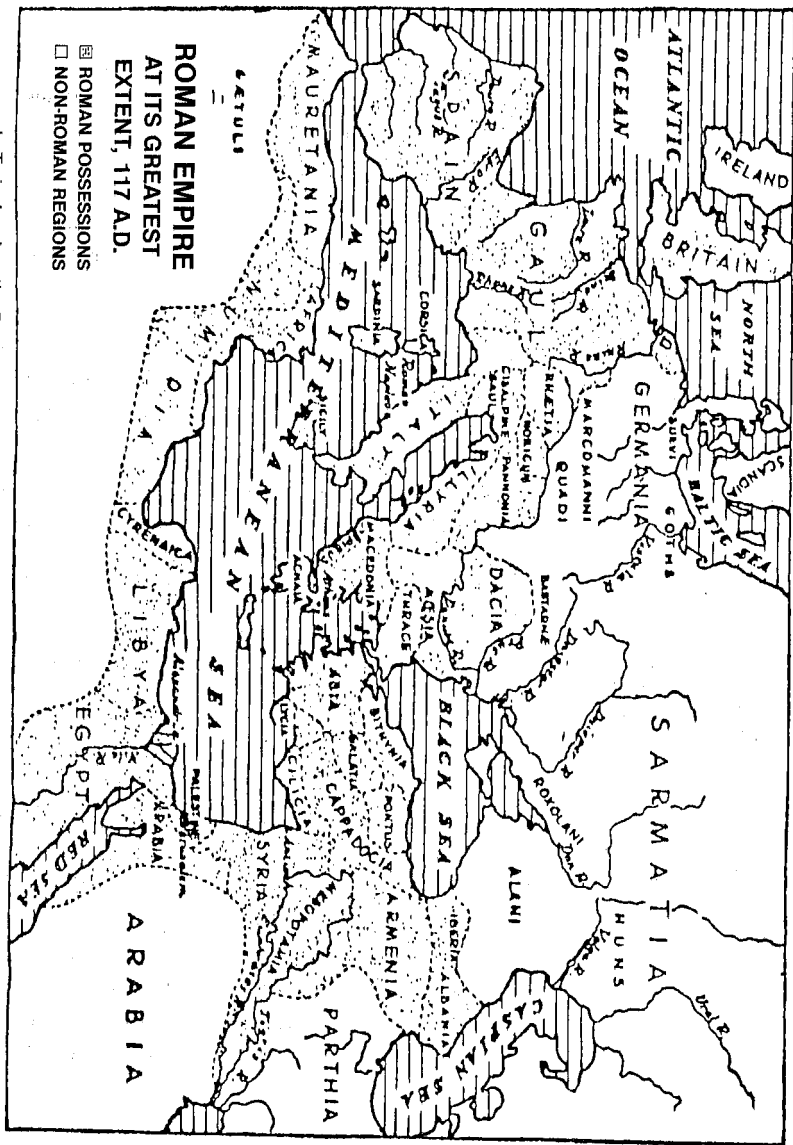
**Bowl 5:** Darkness upon the throne of Rome. The darkened minds of Rome's political leaders resulted in great suffering to her citizens. Their senseless hurt they blamed on God and his people.



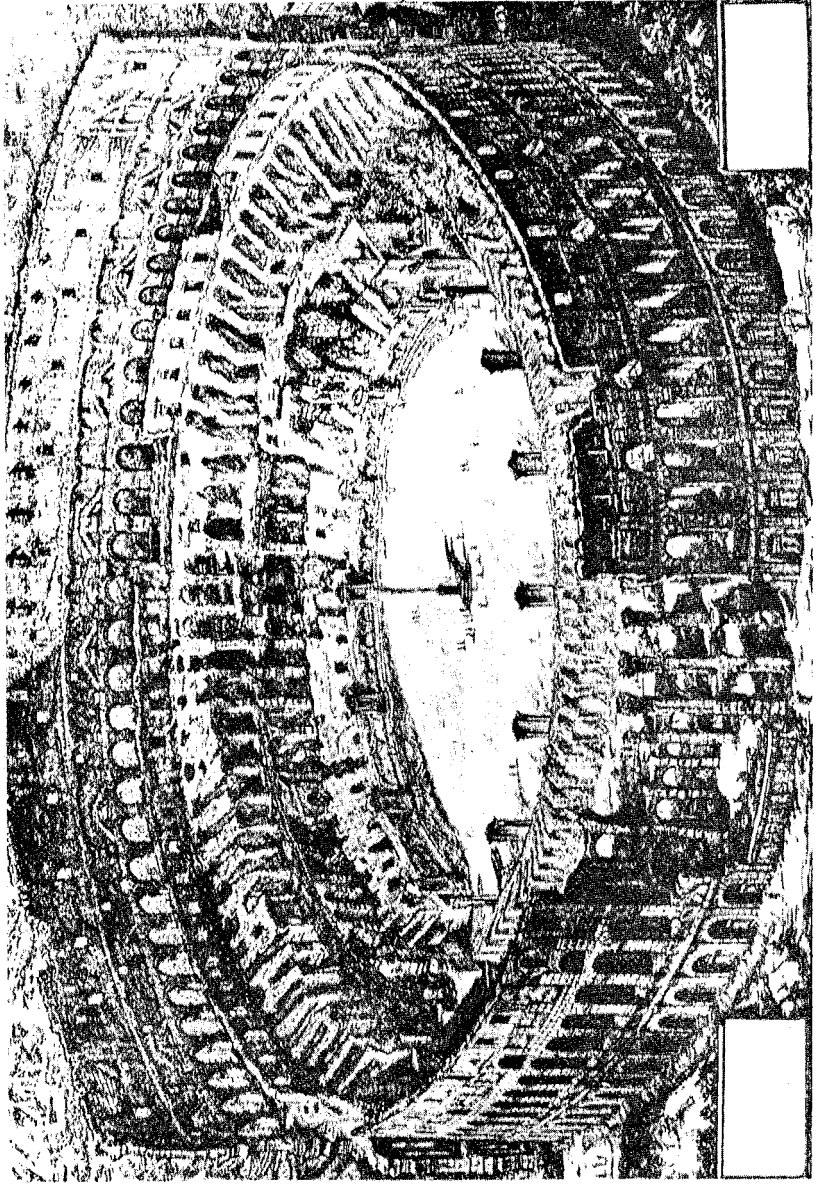
**Bowl 6:** Preparations are completed for the permission of the invasion of Rome by her enemies. All the kings of the world are propagandized to join her in battle against God where God will have a great victory.



**Bowl 7:** Judgment is completed on Rome. Every region of her empire is judged. No one, on island or mountain, is able to keep her from falling. Even the capital city itself is divided up for judgment. The empire which bragged it was eternal is no more!



In Trajan's reign, the Roman Empire stretched from Britain on the west to the Caspian Sea on the east.



The Colosseum in Rome